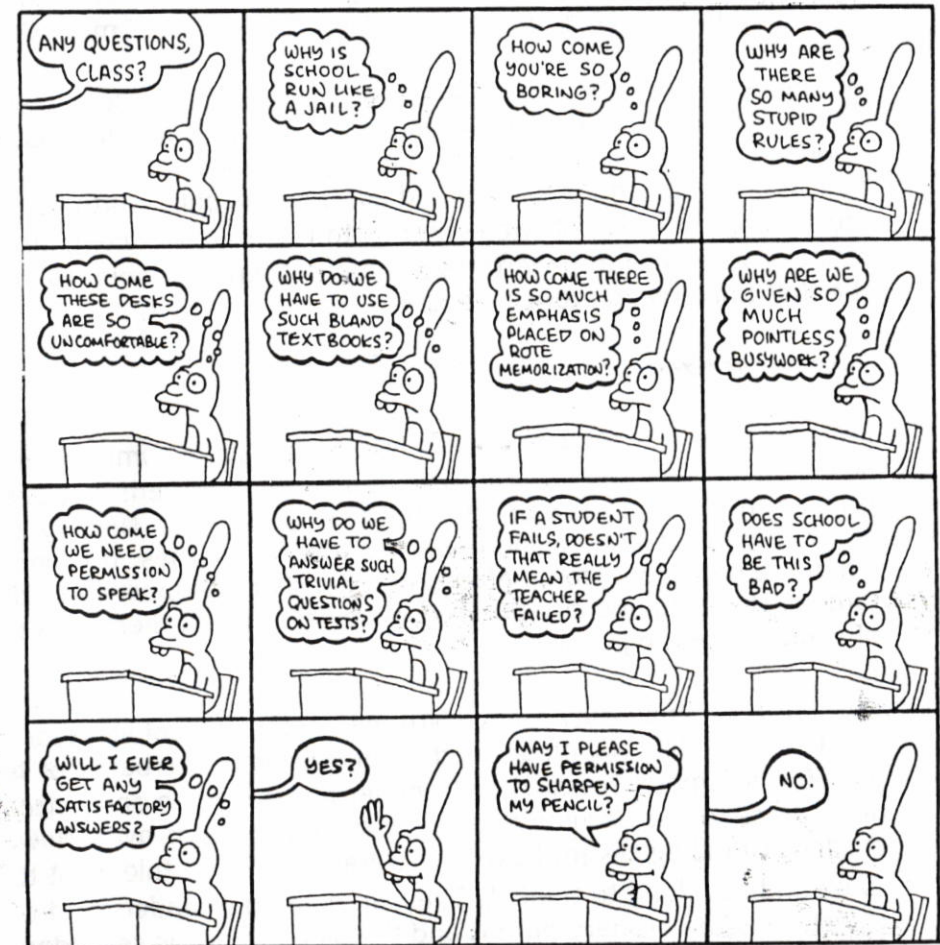
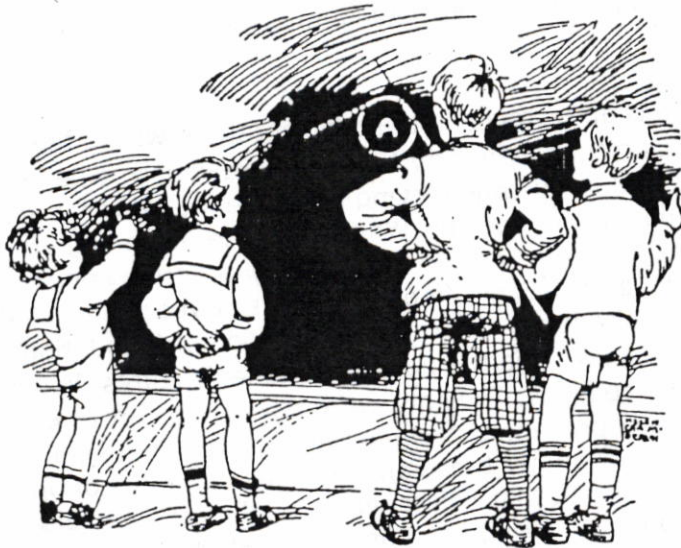


# The Origins of Compulsory Education

by John Gatto



Interview, April '94  
- by Jim Martin



## Introduction

After nearly 30 years in the public schools, John Taylor Gatto has quit his job as a schoolteacher to become one of the country's most articulate critics of American education. The author of *Dumbing Us Down* currently lives in New York City, where he is working on a book about the history of compulsory education called *The Empty Child*.

During a telephone interview in 1994, I wanted to get John Gatto's opinions on President Clinton's edu-du-jour, which is called "Goals 2000". Rather than address the specifics of Goals 2000, or any other educational "reform" efforts aimed at public schools, Gatto soon had me reeling back almost two centuries to the origins of compulsory schools, when children were marched off at bayonet-point to attend the first universal state-run schools.

## Interview excerpts

Prussia is the first state in human history to have a compulsory schooling law that works. There were a handful of them that existed prior to the Prussian law of 1819 but they don't work. Nobody is dumb enough to keep going to school after a few days. It collapses when the cops don't come after you. That's what happened to the famous New England compulsory school law. It was there as a piece of window dressing.

But not in Prussia. They really were marched to school at bayonet point. It was after Napoleon's defeat of Prussia at the battle of Jena at 1806. A famous Prussian philosopher named Fichte announced in an Address to the German People: that the party was over. Now the children would be taken. Now they were going to be told what to think and how long to think it. They were going to understand that the state is the primary parent and the blood family is secondary. Between 1806 and 1819, two brilliant brothers, the Humboldts, a guy named Stein, and a few others, divide the society into children who will become policy makers; children who will become assistants to policy makers (the engineers, architects, lawyers, and doctors); and the children who will be the vast, massed, the used.

the government, many of the government position have very precise schooling requirements. You can in fact control all of the economy by tying jobs to schooling, and therefore you have a motivation for people to learn what you want them to learn.

Back in the time of Sputnik, we get the dike opened and a blank check offered to anyone who can come up with a way to make the thing work. From 1950 -1990 we get, in inflation-adjusted dollars, a quadruple increase in funds available to schooling. The aspect of school as one of the central parts of the economy, independent of its schooling function, is now true in spades. Rivers of money are flowing back and forth, always being augmented never getting being cut back.

There is an increase in the centralization, with fifteen thousand school boards rather than forty thousand previously. One in every six thousand Americans serving on school boards that are almost stripped of their power. Whereas in the beginning of the century we have one in every sixty-five Americans serving on school boards that still have control of the purse. It hasn't yet been transferred to the state legislature. An explosive intrusion of foundation agents are wandering around the halls of state legislatures, key businesses, key teacher colleges. They are writing a tight script to seal the loop holes that have prevented Andrew Carnegie's dream from working smoothly. You get these amazing constructions of organized psychologizing that link together all the school years, all the testing functions, the hiring functions, you get these things being imposed without public knowledge. That's the dead give-away that something isn't kosher.

What we have now is a wide open scene where the concealment is thinner than it's ever been before. The naked power is closer to the surface. My instincts are that it is the identical groups that surfaced around 1905. One of the great evidences of that is a semi-secret group that keeps its deliberations utterly secret, called the Businessmen's Round Table, made up of the 200 largest corporations, announced a few years ago that it was going to take a major seat at the National School policy table, and that it was backing national testing, national examinations. Even among its radical members there was a scheme to tie hiring and promotions to school performance.



We've psychologized the schools by the end of the First World War. Now that's in place. (I'm presenting this as though it was a sequence, actually these things are happening simultaneously but it's easier to see the necessity of having one solidified before another can really get very far). The next step came in 1890, when Andrew Carnegie wrote eleven essays, called *The Gospel of Wealth*. In it he said that capitalism (free enterprise) was stone cold dead in the United States. It had been killed by its own success. That men like himself, Mr. Morgan, and Mr. Rockefeller now owned everything. They owned the government. Competition was impossible unless they allowed it. Which, human nature being what it is, was a problematical thing.

Carnegie said that this was a very dangerous situation, because eventually young people will become aware of this and form clandestine organizations to work against it. Ultimately they'll bring down this edifice. You've got to read all eleven essays, sometimes several times, and only then the majesty of the design emerges. Carnegie proposed that men of wealth re-establish a synthetic free enterprise system (since the real one was no longer possible) based on cradle-to-grave schooling. The people who advanced most successfully in the schooling that was available to everyone would be given licenses to lead profitable lives, they would be given jobs and promotions and that a large part of the economy had to be tied directly to schooling.

So if you ever have two years of your life you want to spend investigating the American licensing industry, you need to look at what occurred in the two decades following Carnegie's original proposal (1890-1910). You're talking about the realization of Carnegie's design. These licenses, which now extend to bus drivers and all sorts of unlikely people who never had to be licensed are then tied to forms of schooling. So they've reserved that part of the work market. Through the cooperation of the business community a large part of the rest of the jobs are reserved. Through the cooperation of

Prussia sets up a three-tier school system, in which one half of one percent of the population is taught to think. They go to school called *academie*. Five and a half percent of the population go to *Realschulen*, where they partially learn to think, but not completely, because Prussia believed their defeat at the hands of Napoleon was caused by people thinking for themselves at times of stress on the battlefield. They were going to see to it that scientifically this couldn't happen. The lowest 94%, (that's some pyramid, right?) went to *volkschulen*, where they were to learn harmony, obedience, freedom from stressful thinking, how to follow orders. They worked out a system that would in fact guarantee such results. In the *volkschulen*, it was to divide whole ideas (which really simultaneously participate in math, science, social thinking, language, and art) into subjects which hardly had existed before, to divide the subjects further into units; to divide the time into small enough units of time. With enough variations in the course of a day, no one would know what was going on.

What they would learn is that someone else told you what to think about, when to think about it, how long to think about it, when to stop thinking about it, when to think of something else, and someone else sets up the secrets.

Now that was surely one of the most brilliant discoveries in human history. Obviously, my sympathies are not with it. It's evil in the genuine sense of the word.

Nevertheless, in the next thirty years a stream of American dignitaries, including Horace Mann, traveled to Prussia. Whoever they were, when they returned to the United States, they would say, "we must have this Prussian system."

Let's take "the empty child" metaphor. You begin with Locke, the blank tablet, and go through Rousseau 80-100 years later, who demonstrates how to write on that blank tablet, and we are on the lip of the 19th century. So who institutionalizes the thinking that is codified over the last 100 years? The Prussians. Prussia becomes a very proprius state under the Prussian's forced-schooling scheme. The King of Prussia, from a dirt poor country, with no natural resources, had subordinated labor so precisely that Prussian industry was a world leader, and Prussian scholarship was the world leader. In 1814 the first American, Edward Everett, goes to Prussia to get a PhD. He eventually becomes the governor of the state of



Massachusetts [and spoke on the same occasion when Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address]. By 1900 all the PhD's in the United States were trained in Prussia. The degree doesn't exist any other place. It's a German invention.

It's based on Francis Bacon's idea, in *The New Atlantis* [1627], of a world research university that scans the world for babies and talent and draws it into the university called Solomon's House, talent which is given to the state. The state becomes invincible. It's impossible to

revolt against the state, because the state knows everything. Francis Bacon's book was widely read by German mystics. By the 1840's Prussia has a number of Solomon's Houses available that are utterly democratic, or about as much as is possible in an imperfect world. They are drawing talent and developing it for the purposes of state power and stability.

The PhD's come back to the United States and they become, to a man, the Presidents of all our Universities, the heads of all our research bureaus, and corporate research is done by German Ph.D.'s. It would still be going on except for the First World War. Obviously, there were dissident elements, and some of them had power, who didn't want this development but weren't strong enough to stop it.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Prussia had openly acknowledged a new development in the sciences called "psychophysics" which argued that people were in fact complex machines. Prussia institutionalizes this, and by the 1870's has created the new science (or pseudo-science, if you're John Gatto) of experimental psychology, the purpose of which is to discover what the nature of this machine is and how to program it. American elite sons travel and study at the feet of Wundt. They come back during the period 1880-1910 and become the heads of Psychological Departments at Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, Cornell, etc. and there aren't any exceptions to this.

Now Wundt is extremely prolific, his published works run to about 67,000 pages. Wundt was an industry. He trains [James McKeen] Cattell, who trains 322 PhD's after the Wundtian system, in this next decade or so. These people set up the new discipline of educational psychology, which becomes a big bucks system. With the help of the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations the system gets control of psychological testing for all the soldiers of the First World War. Aside from the vast power they wielded, it is the sorting mechanism of our whole economy. If we just talk about the money that can be used to buy votes, to change people's minds, to bludgeon down opposition, we're talking about an enormous amount of money flowing out of psychological testing. All of the proponents of which are Wundtian-trained and now head psychological departments in the United States.

By 1910 the one room school has been destroyed. The factory school has been installed everywhere. Thanks to the actions of the great foundations, a national system of schooling was in place. The Carnegie credit guaranteed you'd have a high degree of uniformity but something else did too. There was a shadow organization in existence that has been well documented by mainstream historians. It was called the Educational Trust and it was run out of Stanford and Columbia's Teacher's College. It literally controlled all the Superintendencies in the United States and it placed key students for these jobs.

The Superintendents had to guarantee, of course, to hire for all sorts of out-of-class positions, so the Educational Trust, in a very short time, became a very powerful national shadow organization controlling all the jobs in schooling. The source of this information is *Managers of Virtue* by David Tyack. It is an elite mainstream history, one that is not challenged by the school establishment, because Tyack is part of the school establishment. He has no wish to overthrow the system but just doing his job in documenting the existence of the "educational trust".

Prominent men and women, agents of foundations worked on one legislature after another. Once it passed in New York, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and Michigan, it became easier and easier. Of course they could demonstrate by then how useful it was to the legislature to have this power over schooling and not to allow it to be locally administered. There were enormous contracts to be let. All the jobs that had never existed before in schooling history, non-teaching jobs, were now at the disposal of the legislature.